

Cultural Bridging between Anticipation & Fulfillment with Reference to Kim Barnes's "In the Kingdom of Men"

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Abstract In this paper, I tackle the relationship between East and West from a cultural perspective. Though the difference is wide, they have in common a considerable number of social norms. Trying to make a focus on how the West regards the East on the level of normal individuals, I analyse Kim Barnes' novel "In the Kingdom of Men". Her protagonists migrate from hometown 'Oklahoma' to 'Saudi Arabia' or as we may call "Westerners go East". It also an amalgam of racism, corporate colonialism, culture clash, class issue, religion, grief and loss.

Keywords Cultural Clash, Islamic Culture, Western Culture, Female Oppression, Self-Awareness

1. Introduction

The definition of culture has been under study for years in various fields such as Sociology, anthropology, international business and lately global politics. In such a literary study the concept of culture might refer to "the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group with a focus on the characteristic features of everyday existence shared by people in a place or time." [1] Consequently, we are encountered with two various societies; the East which reflects a medium level of human development and the West with its high level one. Both represent the individuals' quality of life, education and life style. Moreover, culture means the way we eat or prepare food, the way we dress, the kind of cars we like to drive. Culture is really all these things and much more. Actually, we can say that everything we do on a daily basis has a touch and is influenced by culture.

So culture is a framework of behavioural patterns, values, assumptions and experiences shared by a social group. It acts as a filter or lens through which we view others, affecting the way we see them and creating multiple perspectives. Visible aspects of culture such as behaviour, eating habits, or clothing are easy to see. Under the surface, however, hides a huge and potentially fatal portion made up of beliefs, values, customs, experiences and assumptions. Knowledge of the deeper parts helps us understand the "why" behind the behaviour. It enables us to make more informed evaluations of global counterparts and avoid misunderstandings that can waste time and damage relationships.

2. Literary Review

As we mentioned before that culture can be regarded as a people's complete way of life, including beliefs, customs, language and traditions, there are numerous cultures and subcultures present in the world, of primary concern to us in this discussion are the two main opposing cultures in present-day society. One is the culture of Islam — the "complete way of life" set forth in the Qur'an and Sunnah. On the other opposing end is the Western culture. Both cultures present a "complete way of life." However, both ways of life differ drastically.

The difference in the two cultures stems primarily from the source of the cultures. Islamic culture — the way of life of a Muslim — is defined by the Qur'an and Sunnah. It is the culture of Rasulallah (Sallallahu Alaihi Wasallam). It is that way of life upon which he established the Sahaaba after having turned them away from the culture of jahiliyyah (ignorance).

On the other hand, Western culture, for at least the last 1000 years, has been considered to be nearly synonymous with Christian culture. Before this time many Europeans from the north, especially Scandinavians, remained polytheistic, though southern Europe was predominately Christian from the 5th century onwards. Since the Dark Ages, the centralized Roman power waned in southern and central Europe, the dominance of the Catholic Church was the only consistent force in Europe. Therefore, until the Age of Enlightenment, Christian culture took over as the predominant force in western civilization, guiding the course of philosophy, art, and science for many years. Movements in art and philosophy, such as the Humanist movement of the Renaissance and the Scholastic movement of the High Middle Ages, were motivated by a drive to connect

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Catholicism with Greek and Arab thought imported by Christian pilgrims. However, due to the division in Christianity caused by the Protestant reformation and the Enlightenment, religious influence - especially the temporal power of the Pope - began to wane.

Christianity was not the only religion practised in the West, Islam came to Europe in various ways, as merchants (Southern Europe, Russia and the Caucasus) and including through conquest (Al-Andalus and Tatarstan). New research has uncovered a kind of Muslim community in 12th century Hungary with roots in Muslim merchants in commerce with Asia over the Silk Road. Significant communities of Muslim Lipka Tatars lived throughout the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, worshiping in small wooden Mosques and playing a key role in the history of Poland and Lithuania. The Christian conquests of the Iberian peninsula and southern Italy helped to reintroduce ideas and concepts lost to the Western World after the fall of Rome in A.D. 476. Arab speaking scholars saved influential pre-Christian texts and this coupled with the introduction of aspects of medieval Islamic culture (including the arts, agriculture, economics, philosophy, science and technology) assisted with fomenting conditions required for a rebirth of European thought and art Renaissance).

In the 8th century, Muslim forces pushed beyond Spain into Aquitaine, in southern France, but suffered a temporary setback when defeated by Eudes, Duke of Aquitaine, at the Battle of Toulouse. The last Muslim forces were driven from France in 759, but maintained a presence, especially in Fraxinet all the way into Switzerland until the 10th c. At the same time, Muslim forces managed to capture Sicily and portions of southern Italy, and even sacked Rome in 846 and later sacked Pisa in 1004.

As in other areas, Jewish religion is found in the Western world. Minority groups and Jews in particular, often had to contend with discrimination and persecution. This could include being subjected to violence and destruction of property as well as being expelled or banned from various polities, hoping to find havens in other places.

Religion has waned considerably in Europe, where many are today agnostic or atheist and they make up about 18.2% of Europeans population. In terms of irreligion, over half of the populations of the Czech Republic (79.4% of the population was agnostic, atheist or irreligious), the United Kingdom (~25%), Germany (25-33%), France (22-35%) and the Netherlands (39-44%) are agnostic, atheist, or otherwise non-religious. Religious belief in the United States remains strong; about 75-85% of the population identified themselves as religious in one 2005 survey.

Christianity remains the dominant religion in the Western world. Throughout the Western world there are increasing numbers of people who seek to revive the indigenous religions of their European ancestors, such groups include Germanic, Roman, Hellenic, Celtic and Slavic, polytheistic reconstructionist movements, likewise, Wicca, new age spirituality and other neo-pagan belief systems enjoy notable minority support in Western nations.

On the other hand, the countries in the East share many commonalities in their social norms and practices which derive from their religious, economic, social, political and historical characteristics. These traits create a common culture which differentiates them from the West. Social and ethical obligations of Islam are based on the belief that the Islamic community is a real brotherhood where "equality in personal worth, regardless of status and wealth prevail." [2] To become a Muslim is the affirmation of faith and repeating the "Shahaba": that "there is one God and Mohammed is the messenger of the God." [3]

Although Muslims themselves differ in their orthodoxy, Sunni is the most pervading sector. In this doctrine, the Islamic community strives to cultivate Unity. In some occasions, the divisions in religion create tension within societies and serve as a basis of differentiation. On the other hand, all sections accept the Koran as the Holy Book and adhere to its requirements. The Koran has been a unifying force that strongly influences societal practices and acts as a driver towards creating a common culture in the Arabic cluster.

Islam promotes a set of moral values and behaviors in society through the scripts of the Koran and sayings of the prophet Mohammed. The acceptance of the Islamic religion has influenced social values and practices as well as the legal system in the countries in the Arabic world. The Arabic language seems to be a factor that creates a sense of personality among the members of the Arab population regardless of race, religion and region. A characteristic element in the female clothing of Muslim world is the veil and head-scarf which grew as a protection and mark of distinction of women. Family stands at the heart of the society and individuals have huge trust in their family members.

Islamic culture is itself a contentious term. Muslims live in many different countries and communities, and it can be difficult to isolate points of cultural unity among Muslims, besides their adherence to the religion of Islam. Anthropologists and historians nevertheless study Islam as an aspect of, and influence on, culture in the regions where religion is predominant.

The cornerstone of Islamic culture is morality (hayaa) and simplicity. Hayaa (morality / modesty) and simplicity are both qualities of Imaan. Thus the true Islamic society upholds the highest levels of morality and maintains simplicity in every aspect. Some of the salient features of this society are: No free intermingling between non-mahram (those who are not forbidden to marry) males and females. The laws of Hijaab will be observed. Modest dressing and clothing will truly cover the body (also loose enough to cover the shape) and have no flirtatious intent. Men and women will fulfil the separate roles that have been apportioned to them — the husband as breadwinner and the wife as mother and one who fulfils the household responsibilities, etc. This is the foundation to a stable Islamic family which together with other such families forms a stable Islamic community. Apparently, the most important aspect

between Islamic and Western culture is the difference in the mindset of both cultures.

The mindset of the Islamic culture stems from the conviction that Allah is our Creator and Sustainer. Hence in this short stay on earth, we are to serve Him alone in the manner taught by His beloved prophet (Sallallahu AlaihiWasallam). Thus the Islamic culture revolves around the firm belief that our mission in life is to establish complete Deen in ourselves and on the face of this earth. With this mindset, one will sacrifice one's wealth, energies and time as much as possible for the purpose of life. Indeed one will acquire the necessities of life as well, but religion will be the guiding light and driving force. Religion will dictate and all else will follow. The "purpose of life" will demand — and all else will submit. As a result if one does not acquire many comforts and luxuries, it will not matter. Rather, life will be regarded as a journey wherein the traveller is not too concerned about the luxuries and comforts en-route. The traveller is focused towards his destination. Yet, as a result of one's obedience to Allah, one will be blessed with true peace, serenity and contentment.

Conversely, the mindset of Western culture is that the purpose of life is worldly enjoyment. Every comfort and luxury that can be acquired must be attained at all costs.

It is thus evident that Islamic culture and Western culture are worlds apart. The problem is that when people of different cultures live together in the same community, the process of enculturation takes place where people from one culture adopt traits, customs, habits and ideas from the other culture. There is no doubt that this enculturation has occurred in our communities. Many Muslims have tragically become greatly Westernised in their mindset, in adopting a very extravagant lifestyle, in their dressing, in making life revolve mainly around materialistic concepts. Religion for such people has become a "side-line."

When digging deep into the reasons behind such enculturation, we get alarming answer. According to social scientists, people abandon their own culture and borrow from another culture when they regard aspects of the other culture as "better". The Sunnah culture is being abandoned by Muslims for some Western way which they regard as "better" or as having more pleasure and advantage than the Islamic culture!

Western culture is being glorified and vigorously promoted by the media. The media message indicates in an implicit way that if you not following the Western trend; you are retarded and old fashion. Adopting Western culture will bring along its severe negative consequences, Such as a materialistic society with no mission in life, indulgence in drugs and immorality "for fun", Break-down of respect for parents and elders, disintegration of family structures and high divorce rate.

Every effort must therefore be made to preserve the culture of the Qur'an and Sunnah. This requires adopting the company of those who are sunnah conscious, learning about the various sunnats and making an effort to bring them alive in ones' homes and community at large.

The only success for us in this world and the Hereafter is in upholding the way of life of the Qur'an and Sunnah. May Allah keep us steadfast on His religion.

3. Discussion

After this brief summary about the nature and main principle of Islam, let's go back to Barnes' novel *In the Kingdom of Men*, which is her third novel. In this story, "a bare-foot girl from red-dirt Oklahoma"[4] tells us events of her life story. Gin, the heroine, grows up in Oklahoma, among the poorest of the poor. She is raised by her fire and brimstone grandfather, who firmly believes that women are vessels of sin. Her mother has come to a bad end, and the only emotional weapons Gin carries are a generous heart, a mindless defiance and a refusal to be looked down upon anyone.

Gin isn't supposed to get into trouble with boys, however she lost her virginity on a first date to young Mason McPhee, who is slated to go to college. He was "meant to be the finest public defender to come out of the county... He was sure that he could make a difference. He railed against the war in Vitenam and segregation." [5] Then he marries Gin in 1967 and gets a job in the oil field. The young couple are happy, and after a miscarriage, she is told that she can't have any more children, and that phase of their marriage is over.

But life isn't over for this naïve, good-hearted couple. Mason is recruited to go to Saudi Arabia to work for Aramco, which is building an American empire based on Saudi Arabian oil. Shortly, they find themselves in a spacious compound that seems luxurious beyond words to the rough-cut families sent to work there. After a few hours of orientation, Mason is on an oil rig out at sea and Gin is left in the midst of a society tightly controlled by American women.

Actually, in this story the men run the administration of a society made up of darker-skinned men, casting an invisible but exceedingly strong net over the group. The women must not leave the compound unless they are in the company of a man. They aren't allowed to drive cars. Although Alcohol is not allowed, Westerners are given tacit permission to stir up batches bootleg hootch. And although flirtation is tolerated, adultery is frowned upon. In addition to all these facts, the men who work in the oil rigs are not the most elegant, and sophisticated people in the world. Their women must teach themselves how to be rich. What happens to a woman like Gin in such a place? Fortunately, She makes one good girlfriend. She talks with her driver-escort but feels that she has to be careful as she is bound by unseen rules. Also she depends on her Indian houseboy, Yash, to plan delicious meals. The truth is, once Gin has absorbed the luxury, she finds herself feeling imprisoned. At one point, beside herself with cabin fever, she watches as Yash empties the contents of the linen closet on the floor: "Let us fold," [6] he says, and they spend the afternoon doing just that. Meanwhile, off base "accidents" are happening and people are getting killed. Mason, who wants to be doing the right thing, gets involved,

and Gin, driven mad by loneliness, gets equally involved in dramas of her own. It's really a culturally complex story of American venality and greed. Those who find out too much are expelled from the compound. We can notice that this novel isn't complimentary to either the United States or Saudi Arabia.

Barnes regales us with the exploits of her high-spirited protagonist, Virginia "Gin" McPhee, who follows her husband Mason from Texas to the oil fields of Saudi Arabia. Unlike the "trailing spouses" of today, who post instant updates on Facebook or Twitter, Skype with relatives, and keep expatriate blogs, Gin leaves Houston in the 1960s. When she arrives in the Saudi Kingdom she is utterly cut off from American culture and everyone back home. Even her wildest dreams can't prepare her for the world she and Mason step into when he takes a job at the Arabian American Oil Company. In this desert city, the couple are given a house with marble floors, a houseboy to cook their meals, a gardener to tend the sandy patch out back. Gin suddenly has the life she's only read about. But when a young Bedouin woman is found dead in the bay, Gin's world closes in around her and the one person she trusts is nowhere to be found.

Superficially, *In the Kingdom of Men* is seen as a novel of greed and deceit, of Americans out of their depth in Saudi Arabia, and of marriage moving toward ruin. But there is another deeper dimension underneath, that's how the Western eyes capture the Eastern Culture and ideology. One of those views is stated by Sally Wofford in Brick House Literary "Publishers Weekly (Starred Review)" June; "Gin bristles against the comfortable but circumscribed lives of the Aramco wives – suspended between the libertine sexual mores of the boozy expat community and the sexless, draconian prohibitions of the Saudi virtue police." [7]

Slowly, Ginny's story becomes the story of how Saudi tribal chiefs and American magnates both use culture and custom to keep people poor, keep them cloistered, and keep them longing for wealth when they have freedom, and freedom when they have wealth.

Another view depicting the novel as a whole by Julia Edelstein; "Addictive... Barnes's sweeping drama takes the reader on a captivating journey from rural Oklahoma to Saudi Arabia." [8] Donna Seaman in her skillful review explained why Julia regards the novel as; "Barnes brings her own childhood struggles with a strict, isolating Pentecostalism to her enrapturing third novel about a tough, fearless Oklahoma girl raised with religious austerity and misogyny, who finds herself living in a luxurious yet oppressive American oil company enclave in 1970 in Saudi Arabia... Barnes animates a magnetizing cast of cosmopolitan characters, lingers over descriptions of food and clothing, dramatizes cultural contrasts and sexual tension, and brings this intense and compassionate novel of corporate imperialism, prejudice, corruption and yearning to such gorgeously vivid, suspenseful life that the story's darkness is perfectly balanced by the keen wit and blazing pleasure of its telling. A veritable Mad Men of the desert,

with the depth of a Graham Greene novel." [9]

This novel is set in two contrasting countries; America and Saudi Arabia – two locations that on the face of it couldn't be more different. But from the point of view of a woman not allowed to be herself, the two places have startling similarities. Plus, it clarifies the history of the American relationship with Saudi Arabia; it's like a "magical, layered story of West-inside-East, culture layered over culture, and the slow – still ongoing – revolution of gender and race oppression." [10] Ginny McPhee will experience as much oppression in Oklahoma as in Arabia. Though the cultures seem worlds apart, these threads are common.

Juliet Lapidus in The New York Book Review highlights that Barnes's novel is "Lyrical... It takes gut to title a novel after a line from the Bible – 'the Most rules in the kingdom of men' – and then to begin Chapter 1 with possibly the most biblical reference available: 'In the beginning.' Following through, Kim Barnes casts her protagonist and narrator, a young American girl called Gin, in the image of a certain female character from a certain creation myth... In the Kingdom of Men something more than a novel about an Okie who causes trouble in a foreign land. It's that, and a feminist bildungsroman." [11] This quotation highlights one point that women all around the world share, regardless of their nationalities or religion, unexplained adherence and submission which they have to live under the sovereignty and power of men.

Another opinion by Carolyn See in the Washington Post, "*In the Kingdom of Men*, the men run the administration of a society made up of darker-skinned and, by definition, inferior people, but the women run the white-skinned men, casting an invisible but exceedingly strong net over the group... The menus here are... so enticing that you'll want to stop reading for a while and put together a sumptuous dinner... A culturally complex story about American venality and greed." [12] This view clarifies how implicitly humans classify people according to their skin color, claiming their superiority reckoning on their nations' economic and political status.

American women live freely within the walled compound but can't leave without their husbands. Outside the walls, by Islamic law, women are kept the property of their men. Within the walls, American custom isn't exactly beneficent to anyone who isn't white. The more people she meets, the more she realizes the people who are kept far outweigh those doing the keeping. Ginny soon begins to feel kept as well.

We feel that Barnes got the courage to take an intimate look at the beautiful world of Eastern Saudi Arabia. Her American characters are loud and sharp, some joyful, some desperate, but all clinging to their own habits while betraying a general disconnection from and disregard to the Arabian rules all around them. And this disregard leads to the dark, tragic heart of the novel. From a Western eye, Gin regards the type of luxurious life she lives in Saudi is "oppressive" and it was described as "she moves from small-town life to a wider- and wilder- world of privilege, corruption and Middle Eastern geopolitics in the 1960s." [13] All along there is clear

clash of cultures that the cast of the cosmopolitan characters linger over descriptions of food, clothing and traditions.

One of the most ironies in the novel is the point of similarity between the heroine strict upbringing background and the status of women in the place she moved to with her husband. It grabs our attention to the immersive exploration of woman's search for freedom and dignity. Barnes deftly teases humanity out of corruption and hypocrisy. It's not only the Arab women who is suffered and repressed, but also the American heroine who come from a community where the woman is seen as "the seed of sin"[14]. She cleverly writes about the personal conflict and informs the reader about continuing Western misunderstanding of Middle Eastern culture. It's a layered story of West-inside-East, culture layered over culture in addition to the ongoing revolution of gender and race oppression.

If we need to move to a wider scope, we'll find that Muslims are as inclined to say relations are generally bad as they were five years ago. And, in the past, Muslims express more unfavourable opinions about Christians than Americans or Europeans express about Muslims. For the most part, Muslims and Westerners finger point about the causes of problems in their relations, and about which side holds the high ground on key issues. Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere who say relations with the West are bad overwhelmingly blame the West. However, Americans and Europeans tend to blame Muslims for bad relations and significant numbers believe Westerners are responsible.

One point of agreement between Westerners and Muslims is that both believe Muslim nations should be more economically prosperous than they are today. But they judge the problem differently. Muslims blame Western policies for their own lack of prosperity. In contrast, few Americans or Western Europeans think the economic challenges facing Muslim countries are a result of Western policies. Although Westerners have become less likely in the past few years to say Islamic fundamentalism is a chief cause of economic problems in Muslim nations, they remain more likely to hold this view.

Still, both Muslims and westerners believe the corrupt governments and poor education system in Muslim nations are at least partly responsible for the lack of prosperity. After commencing of the Arab spring, Muslims and Westerners are more likely than they were five years ago to say the dearth of prosperity emerges from a lack of democracy. There was a survey conducted in several countries by the Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project discovered how Muslim and Western Publics view one another. It refers that five years later, westerners have a positive opinion of Muslims.

On the other hand, Muslim views toward Christians vary considerably across countries, but generally a wide range of Muslims express positive opinions of Christians. Across the nations surveyed, Christians and Muslims differ in the degree to which religion defines their identity. Among most of the Muslims, they tend to identify with their religion, rather than their nationality as in Pakistan. While Lebanon

and Egypt identify themselves first with their nationality rather than with their religion. In comparison, throughout Europe, most Christians tend to think of themselves in terms of their national identity.

There is a widespread perception that Muslims living in the West do not want to assimilate. Majorities in Europe and the US think that Muslims wish to remain distinct from the rest of society, instead of embracing the way of life in Western nations. Among Muslim communities, many believe that Americans and Europeans are hostile towards Muslims. In fact, Western nations tend to think that Islam is the most religion prone to violent faith, while Muslim publics think that Judaism is the most religion prone to violence. Additionally, there is a gap on views about Muslim assimilation – in Western Europe and the U.S., those who do not have a college degree are more likely than those who tend to believe that Muslims want to remain distinct from the broader society.

Till now, Muslim and Western people continue to see relations between them as generally bad, with both sides holding negative stereotypes of the other. Many in the West see Muslims as fanatical and violent, while few say Muslims are tolerant or respectful of women. Meanwhile, Muslims in the Middle East and Asia generally see westerners as selfish, immoral and greedy as well as violent and fanatical. For the most part, Muslims and Westerners finger point about the causes of problems in their relations, and about which holds the high ground on key issues.

4. Conclusions

Finally, I think there are a lot of challenges ahead of us to try to give ourselves- both Easterners and Westerners- chance to better understand each other as human beings and away from the complexities of policy which might sometimes seem oppressive to other nations. The assumption of having very different cultures that we cannot understand one another is clearly vague. There is much in our hearts and minds that we all, as human beings, share. But policy makers in the East and the West need to be aware of cultural differences. In other words, they need the open mindedness to try to understand and respect each culture with all its peculiarity. I believe it needs a lot of effort to learn to embrace both cultural differences and our common humanity.

Actually, religions, no matter which one it is, teach peace and social harmony. In the last decade or so, there has been huge misunderstanding about the norms and culture of Islam. Around the world, due to negative projections by print and electronic media, Islam has been pictured as a religion of extremism. But the fact of the matter is that Islam is far from all this absurd. In fact, Islam is a religion which is based on global harmony. It is possibly the only religion of the world which has made it compulsory for its followers to pray for each other's well-being whenever two persons come across each other. Islam has made it mandatory to share a part of

wealth with those who cannot afford to live a sound life. Islam is the only religion of the world which has clear rules and regulations regarding the right of women to move in society, to vote and to be equally treated as men.

Islamic culture supports justice and supremacy of courts in society. It discourages maltreatment of human beings on any discrimination. For non-Muslims, Islam has got some clear rules. Non-Muslims are always allowed to live in Muslim societies. They can practice their religious acts as and when they want. Islam also bounds the government of the Muslim states to see that the minorities living in that country are well served and cared for. The religious places of minorities are given full protocol and worth in Islamic states.

Thus it can be very safely concluded that Islam is a religion that teaches harmony, brotherhood and global peace. Due to certain unfortunate incidents, a media war broke up against Islamic laws and culture which started ruining the actually face and culture of Islam.

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